



# 'Our Father's Footprints': Robert Louis Stevenson's Anthropology of Conversion, 1888–94

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ARTICLE



## ABSTRACT

This article sets the missionary work that Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–94) observed, wrote about, and in which he participated in the Pacific within a local context. As a religiously literate observer who travelled widely across the region before eventually settling in Samoa, Stevenson presented a highly distinctive view of the missionary entanglement with Pacific culture. The article draws on Stevenson's letters to family and friends, talks given to indigenous seminarians and religious societies, and his Pacific fiction to assess his views on the critical subject of religious conversion. The first section outlines major themes relating to conversion in nineteenth-century British missionary thought. The following three sections draw on this foundation to contextualize Stevenson's intellectual biography in the Pacific from the perspective of a developing theory of conversion. By paying close attention to his language and ideas about the significance of religious conversion, the article brings to light the importance of local changes in the author's Pacific environment, from his broad comparison of conditions across several Island groups to his personal commitment to the political future of Samoa. As such, the article contributes to an assessment of global influences in Scottish intellectual history.

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## KEYWORDS:

Robert Louis Stevenson;  
conversion; anthropology;  
Pacific Islands; missionaries;  
Samoa

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ratnapalan, L.M. 2023.  
'Our Father's Footprints':  
Robert Louis Stevenson's  
Anthropology of Conversion,  
1888–94. *Journal of Irish and  
Scottish Studies*, 11(1): 4, 1–13.  
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.57132/  
jiss.216](https://doi.org/10.57132/jiss.216)

Produced during the last six years of his life, Robert Louis Stevenson's (1850–94) writing on the Pacific Islands has come to be recognised for its engagement with theories of anthropology. Whether it has been framed as a challenge to conventional evolutionist models of cultural change or as the application of Scottish comparative jurisprudence, critics regard his work as part of the turn of the century debate about the meaning and study of culture.<sup>1</sup> However, modern scholarship has hardly touched an essential aspect of Stevenson's interest in anthropology: the missionary contribution. Ann Colley, who has done the most to demonstrate the importance of missionary culture in Stevenson's writing, analyses the social and political impact of the presence and activities of missionaries in the Pacific. Yet Colley claims that 'Stevenson had little respect for those who lost themselves in the trivia of doctrine' and thus sets him up against narrow-minded missionary culture.<sup>2</sup> The present essay avoids such a reductive reading of the missionary influence on Stevenson and instead provides an intellectual context for the missionary work that he observed, wrote about, and participated in. Stevenson was thoroughly engaged with the philosophical and pastoral issues that were central to this work and he made an important contribution to the theory of conversion by linking it with cultural regeneration.

Stevenson lived in the Pacific at the close of the nineteenth century when much of the region was caught up in rapid commercial, technological, and political changes.<sup>3</sup> Despite the homogenising effect of this process, he remained attentive to the cultural differences between Pacific Islands societies and peoples. He constantly emphasised the importance of comparison over the temptation to generalise. Admonishing a writer on the causes of Hawaiian depopulation, he claimed that his 'views would have been changed by an acquaintance with other groups'.<sup>4</sup> In like manner, as a religiously literate observer who travelled widely across the Pacific before eventually settling in Samoa, Stevenson presents a distinctive view of the missionary entanglement with local cultures.<sup>5</sup> In this he stood apart from most Western visitors who were not missionaries: Covenanter history had been a cornerstone of his childhood imagination while Scottish Calvinism profoundly affected how he grew to see himself as a writer and his relationship to his subjects.<sup>6</sup> An upbringing in a pious Victorian Edinburgh household also made him receptive to mission work and religious life. Missionary activity in India had long fascinated Stevenson, and even in a purported children's novel such as *Kidnapped* (1886), he devoted almost an entire chapter to discussing the work and impact of the Presbyterian missions in the Scottish Highlands.<sup>7</sup> While the Highland missions of the eighteenth century were conducted by the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK) and largely dedicated to combatting the perceived threat of a resurgent Catholicism in the wake of the Jacobite risings, the Pacific missions of the nineteenth century were interdenominational and international in character, and committed to the conversion of non-Christian peoples. But, as Andrew Walls has noted, there were significant continuities between the two evangelical movements, not least in the commitment to educate and 'civilise' native populations, and in

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1 See Liam Connell, 'More than a Library: The Ethnographic Potential of Stevenson's South Seas Writing,' *Journal of Stevenson Studies*, 1 (2004), 150–71; Julia Reid, *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke, 2006); Richard Ambrosini, 'The Four Boundary-Crossings of R. L. Stevenson, Novelist and Anthropologist' in Richard Ambrosini and Richard Dury (eds), *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries* (Madison, WI, 2006), 23–35; Roslyn Jolly, *Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pacific: Travel, Empire, and the Author's Profession* (Farnham, 2009); Tania Zulli, 'Changing Authorial Perspectives in R. L. Stevenson's Pacific Travel Narratives', *E-rea*, 11 (2014) <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/3887>.

2 Ann C. Colley, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Colonial Imagination* (Aldershot, 2004), 31.

3 Matt K. Matsuda, *Pacific Worlds: A History of Seas, Peoples, and Cultures* (Cambridge, 2012).

4 Robert Louis Stevenson, *In the South Seas*, Neil Rennie (ed.) (London, 1998), 32.

5 Richard Hill, *Robert Louis Stevenson and the Great Affair: Movement, Memory, and Modernity* (London, 2017).

6 One of the most insightful modern studies of this subject is Glenda Norquay, *Robert Louis Stevenson and Theories of Reading: The Reader as Vagabond* (Manchester, 2007). For a useful biographical overview of Stevenson's religious beliefs see Robert-Louis Abrahamson, 'Truth Out of Tusitala Spoke: Stevenson's Voice in Post-Darwinian Christianity' in Suzanne Bray and William Gray (eds), *Persona and Paradox: Issues of Identity for C. S. Lewis, his Friends and Associates* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2012), 237–54.

7 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped* (New York, 1921), 148–54. Bradford A. Booth and Ernest Mehew (eds), *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (8 vols, New Haven, CT, 1994), VI, 2149. Hereafter noted as: Stevenson, *Letters* [volume number], [letter number]. Interest in Stevenson's writing about missionaries has waned since the early twentieth century. See Richard Lovett, 'R. L. Stevenson in Relation to the Christian Life and Christian Missions,' *The Sunday at Home* (London, 1901–2); Edward Beal, 'Stevenson's Ideal Missionary,' *International Review of Mission*, 7 (1918), 353–62.

Scotland, both came to be seen as outgrowths of the Scottish Reformation.<sup>8</sup> For Stevenson the prevailing language of sin, conversion, and redemption was ready to hand to describe both his own Scottish society as well as far-flung peoples, and he would use it to connect moral advancement with cultural flourishing. His Scottish religious inheritance helped him to better grasp the agency and influence of Pacific Islands clergy and converts.

Missionaries, ‘the best and the most useful whites in the Pacific’, played a leading role in the region’s intellectual life, wrote and published scholarly work about its languages and customs, and helped to establish many of its educational institutions including schools, technical colleges, and seminaries.<sup>9</sup> Stevenson expressed his views about missionaries and their work across the range of his writing: in letters written to family and friends, talks addressed to indigenous seminarians and religious societies, and in the fictional priests and pastors who populate his Pacific Islands stories. One of the problems in scholarship about Stevenson’s Pacific years is the achronological handling of evidence and the lack of clarity about the influence of the region on Stevenson’s intellectual life.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the present article closely contextualises Stevenson’s writing in order to narrate his thought as a developing commentary on the critical issue of religious conversion.<sup>11</sup> The first section outlines some of the major themes relating to conversion in nineteenth-century British missionary thought and particularly identifies its relationship to anthropology. The following three sections draw on this opening to re-frame Stevenson’s Pacific intellectual biography from the perspective of his theory of conversion. Paying close attention to his language and ideas about the significance of religious conversion also brings to light the importance of changes in the author’s Pacific intellectual environment, from broad comparisons of conditions across Island groups to a personal commitment to the political future of Samoa, where he finally settled. The conclusion reflects on how these findings draw attention to Stevenson’s place in the history of modern religious thought.

## CONVERSION AND ANTHROPOLOGY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH MISSIONARY THOUGHT

British missionary thought about conversion derived from a number of interrelated origins and causes. As shown by the appearance of the missionary Henderland in *Kidnapped*, eighteenth century Scottish Presbyterian missions to the Highlands left a legacy of ideas and experiences that had imprinted themselves on the Scottish popular imagination. A central element of such Home missions was the combination of preaching with the provision of education in the form of schools, biblical teaching, and libraries, in both English and Gaelic languages.<sup>12</sup> The missionary effort rested on a set of convictions concerning the preparedness of non-Christians to receive God’s Word. Evangelical theologians argued that unconverted people possessed an ‘innate moral sense or conscience’ that led to salvation through ‘the Holy Spirit, in conjunction with the human will and the essential knowledge provided by the missionary’.<sup>13</sup> The fact that conversion was possible for all, whether Scottish Highlander or Pacific Islander, proved that God dwelt in every human person and that all peoples on earth would be attracted to Christ.<sup>14</sup>

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8 Andrew Walls, ‘Three Hundred Years of Scottish Missions’ in Kenneth R. Ross (ed.), *Roots and Fruits: Retrieving Scotland’s Missionary Story* (Oxford, 2014), 29–33.

9 Stevenson, *South Seas*, 64. For an introduction to Pacific Islands missionary history and institution building in the nineteenth century, see Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas, 1797–1860* (Melbourne, 1978); John Garrett, *To Live Among the Stars: Christian Origins in Oceania* (Geneva and Suva, 1982); Stuart Piggin and Allan Davidson, ‘Christianity in Australasia and the Pacific’ in Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley (eds), *Cambridge History of Christianity, Volume 8: World Christianities, c. 1815–1914* (Cambridge, 2006), 542–59.

10 Even such a Stevenson scholar as Ernest Meheew assumes that Stevenson’s thought about religion in the Pacific was simply a continuation of his earlier views. See Ernest Meheew, ‘God and the Novelists: 12. Robert Louis Stevenson’, *Expository Times*, 110 (1999), 312–16.

11 On issues in modern scholarship concerning Christian missions and conversion see Brian Stanley, ‘Conversion to Christianity: The Colonization of the Mind?’, *International Review of Mission*, 92 (2003), 315–31.

12 Andrew Walls, ‘Missions: Origins’ in Nigel M de S. Cameron, *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh, 1993), 567–8.

13 Helen Gardner, ‘The “faculty of faith”: Evangelical Missionaries, Social Anthropologists, and the Claim for Human Unity in the Nineteenth Century’ in Bronwen Douglas and Helen Gardner (eds), *Foreign Bodies: Oceania and the Science of Race, 1750–1940* (Canberra, 2008), 261.

14 *Ibid.*, 266–7.

Historical and theological developments in other denominations also aided missionaries' understanding of their task. The High Anglican Oxford Movement celebrated the church of the first century and insisted that the Church of England should strive to follow it 'through a metaphysical relationship between past and present'.<sup>15</sup> Oxford-trained Anglicans such as Robert Codrington, who went to work in the Melanesian mission and who Stevenson referenced in his work, took up these ideas and compared the new Pacific congregations with faithful and devout early European Christians.<sup>16</sup> Some Anglo-Catholics also subscribed to fulfilment theology. Inspired by the writings of St. Paul that 'God had already made himself known to all human beings', such missionaries viewed their task as being to build on 'the points of contact – "the element of faith" – in [indigenous] religion'.<sup>17</sup>

Missionaries were hardly able to be doctrinaire in their approach to the work of conversion, however, and the efficacy of such theologies depended on their adaptation to specific mission contexts. For those in Stevenson's mid-Victorian generation, it was above all the example offered by pioneer missionaries that served as the most active inspiration to vocations and support. One of the most celebrated of these was a Scot, David Livingstone, whose 'Highland heritage influenced deeply his perception of African societies'.<sup>18</sup> Livingstone's ideas were also shaped by the arguments of the British abolitionists in promoting Christianity with commerce as a further stimulus to the 'civilisation' of Africa.<sup>19</sup> Just as influential from the perspective of mission theory were the ideas of his countryman Alexander Duff, whose educational work among high caste Hindus in India was built on the Thomist principle of the unity of (Western) religious and secular knowledge as well as the belief that elite conversion would lead naturally to the conversion of lower social groups.<sup>20</sup> A challenge to these models came with the rise of salvage anthropology, which argued that indigenous populations in decline needed rescuing from all external influences, including missionaries.<sup>21</sup> Some missionaries, opposed to what they regarded as the harmful moral and physical consequences of modern industrial civilisation, also sought to preserve what they understood to be the traditional character of indigenous cultures and promoted their sovereignty against colonial capitalism.<sup>22</sup>

Stevenson observed and commented on these developments in the Pacific Islands. Ideas about conversion provided an intellectual foundation upon which he participated in the conversation about the past, present and future of indigenous cultures. His own thinking developed across three phases that were linked to his movements amid the wider Pacific political and social context: first, there was a period of writing and travel between Summer 1888 and December 1889, during which time he became acquainted with an island world that was marked by almost a century of missionary activity but often retained pre-Christian traits. The seemingly unbroken continuity of indigenous beliefs and practices, and the decline of native populations in some places, led him to theorise, sometimes critically, about the methods and purposes of mission work. There then followed an important period of consolidation and familiarisation with the practical aspects of this work, which he learned about within the missionary environment of Samoa. These years saw the writing of his short story 'The Beach of Falesá' (1892), which may be viewed in part as a commentary on what he had come to know through extended contact with the London Missionary Society's Samoan Mission. In the final years of his life, 1893–4, Samoan political unrest and war framed a more personal commitment to cultural regeneration through conversion. Heartfelt letters, existential fiction, and family prayers epitomised a period

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15 Helen Gardner, 'Defending Friends: Robert Codrington, George Sarawia and Edward Wogale' in Kate Fullagar (eds), *The Atlantic World in the Antipodes: Effects and Transformation Since the Eighteenth Century* (Newcastle, 2012), 153.

16 Stevenson, *South Seas*, 28.

17 Jane Samson, *Race and Redemption: British Missionaries Encounter Pacific Peoples, 1797–1920* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2017), 21–2.

18 George Shepperson, 'David Livingstone the Scot,' *Scottish Historical Review*, 39 (1960), 115.

19 Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester, 1990), 70–1.

20 Stuart Piggin, 'Duff, Alexander' in Cameron, *Dictionary*, 259.

21 Andrew Porter, *Religion versus Empire? British Protestant Missions and Overseas Expansion, 1700–1914* (Manchester, 2004), 260, 268; Samson, *Race and Redemption*, 26–7.

22 Porter, *Religion versus Empire*, 229.

## PACIFIC TRAVELS AND THE LIMITS OF CONVERSION, 1888–90

Stevenson departed with his family from San Francisco for the Pacific in June 1888. After a year and a half visiting islands including the Marquesas, Tahiti, and Hawai'i before arriving in Samoa in December 1889, Stevenson wrote a 'Samoa scrapbook' to accompany a series of images his family had produced while on their travels.<sup>23</sup> In this work he remarked on the success of the London Missionary Society, noting how this was demonstrated by the contemporary autonomy and activity of the native churches in Tahiti and Samoa. Stevenson expressed delight at the variety and incongruity of Samoan subscribers' gifts at a convocation, such as 'a piece of rare wood or even a banana'. He used such examples to stress that missionaries could only succeed in 'teaching the essential', which appears to have meant 'the name and much of the spirit of Christ'. The sincerity of the convocation gifts was evidence of the Samoans' acceptance of this teaching, as was their comfort in adopting indigenous modes of dress on such public occasions. Stevenson also alluded to the serious changes that mission work had brought about in Samoa as 'cumbrous and abominable institutions have passed away'. Yet the survival of indigenous manners and 'old and incongruous superstitions' through layers of Christian evangelisation reminded him of what had happened in Scotland. Therefore, although conversion could alter the culture to a degree, it 'can only be complete with fools or with the perfectly immoral'. Effective missionary work depended on being aware of and tolerating one's limitations, because indigenous traditions had formidable powers of endurance. This was an interpretation of cultural change that was substantially informed by the Scottish Highland experience, which emphasised patient and gradual modification, since 'native manners persist under Christian forms'.

The durability of indigenous traditions through periods of Christian evangelisation is starkly portrayed in his tale 'The Isle of Voices' (1893), which was developed from Polynesian stories. Kalamake, a 'warlock' with supernatural powers, is a Hawaiian traditionalist, who keeps a family Bible at home only to show that he is 'a man of substance'.<sup>24</sup> However, he takes care not to perform a magical rite that will transport him to the island where he becomes invisible and collects shells that are converted into silver dollars, until he has put the Bible 'under the cushion of the sofa so that it was all covered'.<sup>25</sup> At the end of the story, his daughter Lehua and his son-in-law Keola turn to a missionary for advice about what to do with money that they had gained in this way. The missionary understands little of the fabulous story they relate to him about the Isle of Voices, but advises them to give some of the falsely earned money to the lepers and some to the mission fund. Meanwhile, he informs the police about Keola and Kalamake and urges them to keep a lookout.

In 'The Isle of Voices', Stevenson ridiculed missionaries for their insensitivity to indigenous traditions. Some of his early encounters with western clergy in the Pacific reflected this view of the sensible limits within which he believed that they should restrict their activity. In a letter of March 1889 to the American Presbyterian minister Frank Damon, one of his closest correspondents in Hawai'i, Stevenson expressed qualified support for missionary work. Acknowledging 'the necessity and the excellence of the work in the South Seas', he respected missionaries' calling as 'men of devoted lives' and distinguished his differences from them 'in a hundred points' of policy while he 'agreed and hoped with them in a thousand others'.<sup>26</sup> These equivocal sentiments about the missionary impact on indigenous cultures would be elaborated in an exchange with the Reverend Sereno Edwards Bishop, a Presbyterian minister who had produced a social scientific pamphlet titled *Why are the Hawaiians Dying Out?*<sup>27</sup>

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23 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'A Samoan Scrapbook' in Robert Hoskins (ed.), *Sophia Scarlet and other Pacific Writings* (Auckland, 2008), 57–69. The quotations in this paragraph are from this text.

24 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Isle of Voices' in Roslyn Jolly (ed.), *South Sea Tales*, (Oxford, 1996), 104.

25 Ibid., 105.

26 Stevenson, *Letters*, VI, 2149.

27 Sereno Edwards Bishop, *Why are the Hawaiians Dying Out? Or, Elements of Disability for Survival Among the Hawaiian People* (Honolulu, 1888).



Stevenson and Bishop had met during the author's first visit to Hawai'i in 1889 and Stevenson continued their conversation in correspondence.<sup>28</sup> His critical response to the pamphlet displayed his impatience with Bishop's conception of Hawaiian culture, despite their agreement that 'the old [that is, native] religion was a pretty bad one'. Stevenson asserted that the breakdown of the sanctions the old religion had held in place within Hawaiian society had created a '*debacle*' [Stevenson's italics] whose effects were still being felt by the indigenous population more than half a century later. Rather than highlighting Hawaiians' refusal to adopt foreign ideas and customs, such as the wearing of western clothes, Stevenson's analysis of contemporary Hawaiian culture emphasised the role played by 'the original and far too sudden destruction of the tapus'.<sup>29</sup> Sections of the Hawaiian political elite had overseen this process during the early decades of the nineteenth century. In contrast to Bishop, who pointed to what could be described as 'external' factors, such as Hawaiians' reluctance to adopt western sanitary practices, Stevenson attempted to offer an 'internal' explanation of Hawaiian cultural transformation.<sup>30</sup>

Stevenson would most fully express this traditionalist perspective in Samoa where, six months later, he was invited to give a talk to native students at the LMS seminary in Malua.<sup>31</sup> He described the double work of conversion that these pastors-in-training would have to accomplish: first themselves, then their flock. Genuine conversion took place when one went beyond the literal grasp of Scripture and took to heart the spirit of Christ's words. With this transformation, the Christian will seek not so much to avoid sin as to act righteously according to their circumstances. Besides making conversion dependent on the inner conviction of the individual rather than on the educational opportunities afforded by their society, an essential practical element concerned the discernment of vocation through context. Stevenson identified the key tasks for the current generation of Samoan seminarians as being to 'see that your whole race does not fall sick and die' and to guard against 'the loss of your land to foreigners'. He was beginning to link conversion with a commitment to justice and equality against coercive secular power. In time, these students must also teach other Samoans how to work rather than depending on laws and authorities to protect them. Somewhat similar to Alexander Duff's conception of his work among Indians, conversion therefore represented a handing down of ideas that implied cultural flourishing. 'You are the hope of your race', Stevenson declared to the seminarians, 'you are the elect Levites'.

Stevenson's advice to the young Samoans was urgent, practical, and even political, but it was not paternalistic. It assumed that Samoan culture was in danger but that it had the resources to lift itself out of trouble in this age of global resource competition. As his view of the wider stakes of conversion grew, Stevenson's understanding of the missionary vocation also became unsettled by encounters with clergy. A wrenching experience among the selfless Franciscan religious sisters at the leper colony in Molokai in the summer of 1889, followed by a chance meeting with the LMS's charismatic James Chalmers and the equally impressive Methodist George Brown on board the *S. S. Lübeck* from Sydney to Samoa in September 1890, brought him closer to the daily lives and personalities of some of the pioneer Pacific missionaries.<sup>32</sup> To his devout mother, who would have been much pleased by her son's words, he wrote at this time that 'I have become a terrible missionaryite of late days; very much interested in their work, errors and merits'.<sup>33</sup>

Samoa would be Stevenson's final home. As he began to settle into work on the land he had purchased on the island of Upolu, he also became acculturated to its Christian communities.

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28 Bishop recorded 'talk with R. L. Stev'n' in his diary entry of 5 June 1889. Sereno Edwards Bishop, *Journal* Jan. 1886–Mar. 1891, Hawaiian Mission Children's Society (HMCS) Library, Sereno Edwards Bishop papers; Stevenson, *Letters*, VI, 2174A.

29 Ibid. This refers to the breaking of Hawaiian religious and social prohibitions in the early nineteenth century, a process that was in fact led by Hawaiian chiefs rather than missionaries. See Nancy J. Morris and Robert Benedetto, *Nā Kahu: Portraits of Native Hawaiian Pastors at Home and Abroad, 1820–1900* (Honolulu, 2019), 5–6.

30 For a modern comparison, see Jonathan Kamakawiwo'ole Osorio, *Dismembering Lahui: A History of the Hawaiian Nation to 1887* (Honolulu, 2002).

31 Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Address to Samoan Students, Malua' in Stevenson, *Sophia Scarlet*, 69–77. The talk is dated January 1890. Quotations from this paragraph are from this text.

32 Martha Mary McGaw, *Stevenson in Hawaii* (Honolulu, 1950); Richard Lovett, *James Chalmers: His Autobiography and Letters* (New York, 1900), 350.

33 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2253.

Religious figures would guide him in his new environment, none more so than the English Reverend William E. Clarke of the London Missionary Society. Besides the help Clarke provided, including interpreting from Samoan, the two men would discuss ‘missionary policy’ as Stevenson began to recognise that ‘intricate questions ... spring up daily in the missionary path’.<sup>34</sup>

## WITHIN THE SAMOAN MISSIONARY FOLD, 1890–2

During a feast held in November 1890, Clarke took the unprecedented step of attending the national dance, the *Siva*, which native pastors had proscribed for its obscenity so that any church members present would be excommunicated. Stevenson later wrote to Clarke expressing support for his action.<sup>35</sup> His letter points to the detail and depth of their conversations about Samoan culture and the ethics of conversion, while also hinting at the complex relationship between white and indigenous pastors. Stevenson applauded Clarke for his courage and affirmed his redemptory view of Samoan culture, while recognising how his decision would have upset the native pastorate. The conclusion to this episode took place a few days later when, on one of his frequent visits to the LMS Mission, Stevenson learned that ‘The native pastors (to everyone’s surprise) have moved themselves in the matter of the native dances, desiring the restriction to be removed or rather to be made dependent on the character of the dance’.<sup>36</sup>

By his fortieth year, Stevenson was established within the missionary culture of Samoa. Clarke, who used his influence to obtain indigenous retainers for the Stevenson household, remembered him as a helpful intermediary between the missionaries and the foreign commercial or ‘beach’ community, who sometimes fell out over issues of propriety.<sup>37</sup> Stevenson also took a personal interest in indigenous education under the missionaries, addressing students and teaching mixed children at a Sunday School. He expressed to his friends in Edinburgh the strangeness of his new habit of regular church attendance.<sup>38</sup>

Stevenson also corresponded with missionaries about Pacific cultures and absorbed many of their concerns, such as warning local people about the dangers of leprosy.<sup>39</sup> He published a short story connected to this theme, ‘The Bottle Imp’ (1891), in Samoan for a local missionary journal. The story encapsulates missionaries’ predicament at the close of the nineteenth century, when they were more dependent than ever on indigenous agency to preserve their hard-won gains against the rising threat of colonial capital. In this dark tale, a Hawaiian named Keawe is tricked into purchasing a bottle containing a demon who will grant him anything he wishes. The bottle can only be sold at lower than its purchase price and if it is still in his possession at the time of his death then the owner will be consigned to hell. After making his fortune with the bottle, Keawe sells it and is then betrothed to marry Kokua. When he subsequently discovers that he has contracted leprosy, he re-purchases the bottle at an impossibly low price in order to effect a cure. The remainder of the story concerns the newlywed couple’s desperate efforts to resell the bottle in a Pacific Islands culture in which nearly everyone is terrified by the prospect of going to hell. In the end, it is not an indigenous islander but rather an ‘old brutal Haole’ [white man] who purchases the bottle.<sup>40</sup>

Kokua is the hero of the story. A spirited and clever woman, when she first learns of her husband’s distress at having re-purchased the bottle in order to cure his leprosy and live a healthy life with her, she immediately declares that she will “‘save my lover’”.<sup>41</sup> For “‘I was educated in a school in Honolulu; I am no common girl’”.<sup>42</sup> Being a Hawaiian subject, Kokua would have received

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34 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2266.

35 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2276. Clarke explained the circumstances of this action in W. E. Clarke, ‘Robert Louis Stevenson in Samoa,’ *Yale Review*, 10 (1921), 281–3.

36 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2277.

37 Clarke, ‘Stevenson in Samoa,’ 268–9.

38 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2286.

39 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2336. For their subsequent fallout see Colley, *Colonial Imagination*, 158–70.

40 Stevenson, ‘The Bottle Imp’ in *South Sea Tales*, 98.

41 *Ibid.*, 92.

42 *Ibid.*

a Christian schooling.<sup>43</sup> In the depths of their distress, Kokua and Keawe would sometimes 'pray together'.<sup>44</sup> Later, she secretly arranges to sell the bottle to an old man and then buys it from him in order to release her husband from its curse. 'All that she had heard of hell came back to her; she saw the flames ablaze, and she smelt the smoke, and her flesh withered on the coals'.<sup>45</sup> Kokua vividly remembers her religious education during this existential crisis; the story's excitement and passion depend on the religious belief of its characters. Enveloped in a tale of selfless love, 'The Bottle Imp' dramatises the connection between the attractions of the flesh and the destruction of the soul. The theatre of the drama is a converted indigenous Pacific world dangerously tempted towards materialism by foreign wealth.

The changing social relationships in Samoa among foreign and indigenous clergy, traders, and islanders, was a central inspiration of Stevenson's short story, 'The Beach of Falesá', which he also completed during this period. To his friend Sidney Colvin he explained that he had written 'the first realistic South Sea story ... with real South Sea characters and details of life'.<sup>46</sup> It describes the adventures of an English trader named Wiltshire on the island of Falesá<sup>47</sup> where he has moved, only to gradually learn that another trader, named Case, has established a monopoly. Moreover, Case's authority over the island has extended to the spiritual as well as the material realm, raising the concern of the local clergy. Growing in suspicion of Case, Wiltshire draws closer to Tarleton, the Protestant missionary who, in a conversation that takes place at the mid-point of the story, describes his struggles with his most prized convert, the indigenous pastor Namu.

Tarleton's narration presents some of the 'intricate questions' of missionary work that Stevenson had encountered in Samoa. William Clarke, who appears to have been the model for Tarleton, described how Stevenson had come to realise 'that many of the shortcomings in missionary methods, which he justly criticised, were equally obvious to us, and were due to our limitations in working with a native pastorate, imperfectly educated, and suddenly confronted with a civilisation of which they knew next to nothing'.<sup>48</sup> This throws light on Tarleton's narration of Namu's fall under the influence of the nefarious Case. 'I had great confidence in Namu', laments Tarleton, 'I fear it only shows how easily we are deceived'.<sup>49</sup> An eloquent preacher who commands a ready knowledge of Scripture, Namu lacks the cultural awareness that often underpins European Christianity. For example, he has not grasped the significance of denominational differences in adopting the practice of making the sign of the cross as a prayer. He makes it, and he encourages other islanders to do so, because he believes it will ward off the 'Evil Eye' that had apparently afflicted Wiltshire's predecessor, Vigours. Namu has heard that the same was done, with effect, in 'Popery' Italy.<sup>50</sup> When Tarleton presses him on the issue, Namu supports his reasoning by citing scripture 'very like a native pastor'.<sup>51</sup> Because Case is behind the rumour that Vigours was afflicted with the Evil Eye and Case is not 'a man of sanctified life', Tarleton advises Namu to keep away from him.<sup>52</sup> But again Namu has a well-reasoned response. He asserts that he, Namu, is able to distinguish between useful and harmful forms of secular knowledge, just as Tarleton had claimed to have done during his own college education under non-religious teachers. Tarleton is deeply troubled by Namu's behaviour and explanations because he had invested so much in training him and in building up the native church at Falesá. Recognising the delicacy of the situation and searching for a

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43 James R. Hunt, 'Education in the States: Historical Development and Outlook' (Washington, 1969), 291.

44 Stevenson, 'Bottle Imp,' 94.

45 Ibid., 96.

46 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2351.

47 An amalgam of Samoa and other Pacific locales Stevenson had visited. Roslyn Jolly, 'Stevenson and the Pacific' in Penny Fielding (ed.), *Edinburgh Companion to Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh, 2010), 130.

48 Clarke, 'Stevenson in Samoa,' 281.

49 Barry Menikoff, *Robert Louis Stevenson and 'The Beach of Falesá': A Study in Victorian Publishing, With the Original Text* (Stanford CA, 1984), 152.

50 Ibid., 152-3.

51 Ibid., 153.

52 Ibid.



prudent solution, he decides on ‘a quiet course’ of chiding and persuasion, which seems to lead to Namu’s ‘genuine repentance’.<sup>53</sup>

The example of Pastor Namu demonstrates the naivety of maximalist and linear expectations about conversion. In ‘The Beach of Falesá’, Stevenson portrayed conversion not as a one-off event but rather as a process. Knowledge, no matter how well deployed, could never be sufficient in itself to ‘explode’ and remove older ways of thinking or to keep the mind from contamination by false ideas such as those held by Case.<sup>54</sup> Conversion meant encouragement, supervision, and persuasion. Mission work involved the full intellectual and emotional resources of the missionary; relying on the authority of Scripture alone would not suffice because intelligent men like Namu, trained to read the Bible, were capable of interpreting it in defense of their own actions.

With the trader Case’s use of illusions and tricks to wrestle authority away from the missionaries, ‘The Beach of Falesá’ is also a study of the often uneasy intertwining of Christianity and commerce in the Pacific. Stevenson became personally involved in this problem during a conflict over the Rev. Arthur Claxton’s receipt of a significant salary from the impoverished Samoan government for an indigenous advocacy position. A letter from the author helped the LMS Directors to decide that they, not the Samoan government, should bear the costs of Claxton’s appointment.<sup>55</sup> Stevenson wanted to ensure that religion and politics were kept as much apart as possible in Samoa. To the LMS’s Foreign Secretary, Ralph Wardlaw Thompson, he contended that ‘It is my opinion, and my prayer, that the Mission should return to its old, traditional policy and maintain a strict neutrality in politics’.<sup>56</sup> Although Thompson replied to assure him that the Society “‘will not be slow’” to caution any who overstep “‘the missionary character’”, it is another matter whether he had the power to uphold this policy in a time of Samoan political unrest. Stevenson understood the limitations of Thompson’s metropolitan reach, noting that ‘even in your Mission opinions are not unanimous’, but he continued to insist that ‘the Mission, which is the organ of religion, culture, and improvement, should [not] be irretrievably committed upon either side’.<sup>57</sup>

Stevenson believed that the complex and sophisticated nature of Samoan politics was misperceived or ignored by Europeans. As he wrote to the veteran LMS missionary S. J. Whitmee in April 1892, ‘White man here, white man there, Samoa is to stand or fall (bar actual seizure) on the Samoan question’.<sup>58</sup> The two contending claimants to local power, Malietoa Laupepa and Mata’afa Iosefo, formerly friends, had to be encouraged to work together rather than be reduced to the role of support for or opposition to the imperial Powers – German, British, and American – that were interested in Samoa. While ‘the two men are petpetually [sic] offered as alternatives’, ‘they are no such thing – they are complementary; authority, supposing them to survive, will be impossible without both’. The intermingling of political and religious concerns would continue to be a theme in the final years of his life, when conversion became an increasingly personal matter.

## **SAMOAN POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, 1893–4**

One of Stevenson’s most important statements linking missions, conversion, and culture was the talk entitled, ‘Missions in the South Seas’, presented to the Women’s Missionary Association and members of the General Assembly in Sydney in March 1893. Describing himself as a ‘far from uninterested layman’, this paper demonstrates both his willingness to grapple intellectually with problems arising from the missionary vocation to conversion and his awareness of changing missionary policy and training at the close of the nineteenth century. His opening remarks, perhaps intended to assuage his audience, acknowledged his own ‘great prejudice against missions in the South Seas’, which experience and observation had ‘at first reduced,

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53 Ibid., 155.

54 George Smith, *The Life of Alexander Duff*, Vol. 1 (New York, 1879), 362.

55 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2354A.

56 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2395A.

57 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2434.

58 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2403.

and at last annihilated'. Should anyone 'come and see [missions] on the spot', he asserted, then 'honest persons ... will cease to complain of mission work and its effects'. Stevenson proceeded to explain his own view of mission work, affirming a version of fulfilment theology. It pleased him to note that this was the guiding principle of 'the new class of missionaries' he had recently observed in the Pacific, perhaps thinking of the different approach of the LMS in Samoa compared with some of the clergy he had met earlier in Hawai'i. The 'new class' of missionaries were distinguished by their gradualist approach to conversion, sparing 'so far as it is possible, native opinions' and 'native habits of morality' while working upon 'rather the point of agreement than the points of difference'. Not maximalists like the older evangelical missionaries, breaking tabus and choosing 'the path of destruction', Stevenson preferred these newer missionaries and found more effective their adoption of a course of 'confirmation and extension' rather than 'iconoclasm'.<sup>59</sup>

But how could one be certain that it was the Christian faith that the missionaries were thus building up in their indigenous flock? Stevenson's response was instructive. 'There is here a vast reservoir of moral power', he insisted, which missionaries should 'utilise'. Learning from the example of Clarke's tolerance of the Samoan *siva*, Stevenson applauded the missionary that would 'develop that which is good, or is capable of being made good in the inherent ideas of the race ... and seek to minimise and to gradually obliterate the other'. 'Moral power', the vital force transmitted through ancestral traditions that was essential to cultural flourishing, would thus be saved. 'We shall never do well, we shall certainly never do nobly, except upon the lines marked for us by our father's footprints'.<sup>60</sup> He concluded that 'the true art of the missionary' was to guide people toward authentic growth in faith.<sup>61</sup>

Stevenson had moved far beyond his earlier ambivalence about missionary methods, which he had thought of as being pitted against the preservation of indigenous culture. Practical experience in Samoa had taught him that mission work seldom rested upon such simple dichotomies. What he now proposed was no salvage anthropology, debilitated by its contrasting of loss and survival; nor was it its conservative theological counterpart, imagining innocent indigenes struggling helplessly against the moral perils of industrial civilisation. Instead, Stevenson articulated a theological anthropology, in which the missionary's discerning patience could support the culture along its ancestral way towards 'new possibilities of advancement'.<sup>62</sup> Such a mediating figure required special abilities: it was becoming clear that the missionary was not to be thought of as a surgeon who removed what was unhealthy and replaced it with something foreign, but rather as a midwife who aided the messy and painful arrival of the newborn from out of the body of the parent.

During this period of intense reflection on the meaning of conversion, Stevenson resumed work on a story, *The Ebb-Tide* (1894), which includes three separate occasions of evangelisation and concludes with the dramatic conversion of the treacherous American captain Davis at the barrel of the missionary-turned-pearl fisher Attwater's gun.<sup>63</sup> Two weeks after his dramatic repentance, Davis receives an offer from the Briton Herrick to leave Attwater's atoll on aboard another ship and to return to his wife and children, who he has not seen in years. Stunningly, the previously irreligious Davis chooses to remain on the island with Attwater. 'I found peace here', he explains, 'peace in believing'.<sup>64</sup> Herrick is greatly taken aback, while Davis proceeds to encourage the younger man:

'O! why not be one of us? why not come to Jesus right away, and let's meet in yon beautiful land? That's just the one thing wanted; just say, Lord, I believe, help

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59 Stevenson, 'Missions in the South Seas', in *Sophia Scarlet*, 107–9. Because of her son's illness Margaret Stevenson delivered the speech.

60 Stevenson was engaged in writing a life of his grandfather, father and his uncle during this period.

61 Stevenson, 'Missions in the South Seas', 109.

62 The ideas of the near-contemporary French Catholic priest Francis Libermann provide an interesting comparison. See Adrian van Kaam, *A Light to the Gentiles: The Life Story of the Venerable Francis Libermann* (Milwaukee WI, 1959).

63 Stevenson had composed the first five chapters earlier with his stepson. He rewrote these and completed the remainder alone.

64 Stevenson, 'The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and Quartette' in Jolly (ed.), *South Sea Tales*, 252.

thou mine unbelief! And He'll fold you in His arms. You see, I know! I been a sinner myself!<sup>65</sup>

So ends the novel. Not only does Davis appear to have renounced his former ways, he also attempts to evangelise the sceptical Herrick.

Davis is the only white convert to appear in Stevenson's Pacific fiction. Just as Stevenson indicated in his talk on missions earlier that year, the type of conversion that Davis undergoes can be divined in the decisions that he has made in his life. As captain of the *Sea Ranger*, he had gotten drunk on the job and was responsible for the death of six people as the vessel ran aground. So ashamed that he will not even return to see his family, his subsequent decline to the status of an island beachcomber was momentarily reversed with the opportunity to captain the *Farallone*. But, again seduced by drink, he loses control of himself and of the vessel. The moral consequences of Davis' free actions have shaped his course: stealing a ship and fraudulently intending the sale of its cargo; drinking to destruction; plotting the murder of Attwater. His conversion therefore takes the form of a sudden and violent liberation. The novel's ending seems troubling because Attwater, despite his own cruelty and oppressiveness, is an instrument of grace. The missionary-turned-pearl trader offers a deliberately distorted example of Christianity meeting commerce, clearly intended by Stevenson as a warning about their incompatibility after his experience with the LMS in Samoa. While no longer claiming to be interested in the missionary vocation, however, Attwater retains a gift for spiritual discernment as he recognises that what Davis most needs to be saved from is himself.

During this period, the war was concluding in Samoa and Stevenson's friend Mata'afa Iosefo, a devout Catholic, was ousted from the islands, a decision which greatly upset the author. Like the missionaries, Stevenson had tried to avoid partisanship during the war, but his growing acceptance by Samoans introduced a note of gratitude into his letters. In July 1893, he wrote to Mata'afa, 'My heart is sore because of my very great love for you. My family has been weeping because of the Chiefs who are dead. Great is our love to you and great also our distress'.<sup>66</sup> To Colvin he eagerly described how his Protestant servants' attendance at the May festivities in their household uniform meant that 'Vailima [his home] is publicly taken as a family'.<sup>67</sup> He enjoyed being regarded 'as a chief' and explained with pride to another correspondent that 'no Samoan works except for his family'.<sup>68</sup>

Stevenson shared in the religiosity of Samoan life. He composed evening family prayers (including his native servants) at Vailima, singing Samoan hymns.<sup>69</sup> On Sundays, after attending church with his step-grandson, he taught at the Sunday school.<sup>70</sup> He carried out other useful services on behalf of the Mission reporting, for example, on the progress of a native teacher who was stationed on a nearby island.<sup>71</sup> Stevenson's heartfelt letters to Samoans, brimful of Biblical language, also marked a profound change in the author. In July 1894, he pled with Malietoa Laupepa, the Samoan ruler, to release an elderly rebel, Po'e, offering bail himself. He made his plea in explicitly Christian terms, reminding Laupepa that, 'As our Father in Heaven loves us all, let us love this prisoner and be willing to share his burden'.<sup>72</sup> The following month, he wrote to Mata'afa Iosefo informing him of the news that Po'e and a number of the other rebel Chiefs had been pardoned and released. Stevenson had not been able to secure Mata'afa's pardon and recall from exile, but he encouraged him to 'Be of good courage in the strength and loving kindness of the Lord', and quoted the Psalms in consolation.<sup>73</sup>

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65 Ibid.

66 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2606.

67 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2651.

68 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2665.

69 Robert Louis Stevenson, *Prayers Written at Vailima by Robert Louis Stevenson; With an Introduction by Mrs Stevenson* (New York, 1904).

70 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2725.

71 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2728.

72 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII, 2747.

73 Stevenson, *Letters*, VII 2777.

That summer, Stevenson wrote to his English friend Adelaide Boodle, who had announced her decision to become a missionary. All of the elements of his mature thinking about mission work and conversion can be found in his advice to her. He cautioned Boodle that the work involves much patience but that it is worthwhile, because 'there is some good done in the long run'. The missionary was responsible for the shaping of the moral character, so one should expect slow progress and to judge gently in the meanwhile, remembering that '*you cannot change ancestral feelings of right and wrong without what is practically soul-murder*' [his italics]. Stevenson advocated fulfillment theology, instructing Boodle to 'always find in [indigenous customs] some seed of good; see that you always develop them; remember that all you can do is to civilise the man in the line of his own civilisation such as it is'. He advised her to work for results beyond her own lifetime rather than to hope for sudden and miraculous conversions: 'what you have to do is to teach the parents in the interests of their great-grandchildren'.<sup>74</sup>

The Samoan chiefs whose release Stevenson had helped to secure repaid him by building a road for his Vailima estate. The speech that Stevenson gave to the chiefs on the day 'the road of loving hearts' was celebrated, 7 October 1894, also employed his anthropology of conversion. He used the example of the road to teach his Samoan listeners the value of building and being industrious in order to defend their country in a common effort. He developed the parable of the talents (Matt 25: 14–30) to describe the 'judgement' that fell upon people – his examples were Irish, Scots, and Hawaiians – who did not productively occupy their land. He urged Samoans to become builders, farmers, and educators, in addition to being warriors, 'for the love of [your] brothers, and [your] children, and the whole body of generations yet unborn'. Encouraging the chiefs to take the long view of development, he could think of no better example than the Romans, 'the bravest and greatest of people'. They were 'mighty men of their hands, glorious fighters and conquerors', but also 'the best at building roads' that helped all people. Many an old Roman road still remains in Europe 'solid and useful as the day it was made'. Some were built a long time ago, 'perhaps before the coming of Christ.' 'And the people still remember and bless them for that convenience'.<sup>75</sup> Roman civilisation in the form of engineering – the profession of his own family – had quite literally paved the way for Christianity. Stevenson encouraged Samoans to think of their conversion in the same way.

## CONCLUSION

Stevenson thought of conversion as a complex process that demanded intellectual as well as physical labour. What made that work possible in the first place was the 'moral power' inherent in the individual, which the patient and discerning missionary would find and nurture. Western philosophy of the previous century and a half had helped to forge this anthropology that was an article of faith in the religious education of many nineteenth-century Britons. John Henry Newman reflected on how all the Christian denominations in his day thought of conscience as

the voice of God in the nature and heart of man, as distinct from the voice of Revelation ... a principle planted within us, before we have had any training, although training and experience are necessary for its strength, growth, and due formation.<sup>76</sup>

The new Christians of the Pacific, in whom conscience was also naturally endowed, would receive their 'training' at the hands of missionaries. The mission-driven environment framed Stevenson's observations of the Island Pacific. The intellectual landscape created by the interaction of indigenous and mission traditions imbued his cultural commentary with purpose and imagination. Issues pertinent to mission work stimulated his thinking about cultural integrity, survival and adaptation.

Stevenson's writing points to a theological anthropology that was committed to transformation within a fundamental human fraternity. The questions about culture to which he repeatedly returned were not simply of a material nature, with the struggle to find the right balance between tradition and progress. While this confirms the prevailing scholarly view that Stevenson was a 'dissenter from meliorist anthropological narratives', the present essay has

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74 Stevenson, *Letters* 7, 2755.

75 Stevenson, 'Address to the Samoan Chiefs, Vailima,' in *Sophia Scarlet*, 121–5.

76 John Henry Newman, 'To his Grace the Duke of Norfolk,' [www.newmanreader.org](http://www.newmanreader.org), accessed 8 January 2019.

demonstrated how this conclusion may be convincingly derived through engagement with the religious thought of Pacific Islands missionaries.<sup>77</sup> In the process Stevenson became concerned with the effort required to direct consciences toward seeking an authentic relationship with God. Consciousness of the dangerous political situation facing many Pacific Islands societies intensified his search for a language of conversion that would reconcile indigenous sovereignty with morally fruitful endeavor. Conversion of the individual Samoan also became the means of converting Samoan culture towards seeking unity, demanding justice and resisting coercion by the imperial powers.

Stevenson cared passionately about the survival of Pacific Islands peoples and cultures. Close engagement with mission work taught him that conversion would be a key component of indigenous cultural survival. Engaging with mission thought also helped him to articulate a more personal anthropology. Historians are beginning to rediscover the importance of religion and religious figures in Pacific anthropology.<sup>78</sup> As a religiously literate outsider, Stevenson offers an insightful view of this relationship. While at times critical, he was ultimately sympathetic to missionary activity and participated in the work of conversion in Samoa as he realised that to affirm careful and sensitive missionary work meant to respect and uphold the dignity of indigenous cultures. Such a position grounds Stevenson firmly in a modern tradition of religious thought about the nature and purpose of mission.<sup>79</sup>

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author is the colleague of a member of this journal's editorial board. The author is a former colleague of the journal's assistant editor.

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### TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ratnapalan, LM. 2023.  
'Our Father's Footprints':  
Robert Louis Stevenson's  
Anthropology of Conversion,  
1888–94. *Journal of Irish and  
Scottish Studies*, 11(1): 4, 1–13.  
DOI: [https://doi.org/10.57132/  
jiss.216](https://doi.org/10.57132/jiss.216)

**Submitted:** 17 February 2020

**Accepted:** 17 May 2023

**Published:** 27 July 2023

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*Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Aberdeen University Press.

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77 Roslyn Jolly, 'Essays on RLS', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920*, 50 (2007), 454–7.

78 Samson, *Race and Redemption*, 8–9, 72–3; Allan K. Davidson, 'The Legacy of Robert Henry Codrington', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 27 (2003), 171–6; Helen Gardner and Patrick McConwell, *Southern Anthropology – A History of Fison and Howitt's Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (Basingstoke, 2015).

79 Vatican II, *Ad Gentes Divinitus* (1965); Lesslie Newbegin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1978).